

# **Augustinian Existentialism and Yoder's Messianic Politics: "Revolutionary" Implications of Augustine's Understanding of Right Worship**

*Justin D. Klassen*

## **Introduction: Faith and Politics**

In *The Politics of Jesus*, John Howard Yoder seeks to articulate a revolutionary Christian social ethic based on his reading of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as messianic king. On Yoder's account, Jesus' biography outlines an original, decidedly political engagement with the established ruling authorities, an engagement by which followers of Christ, and indeed all who want to live "a genuinely human existence,"<sup>1</sup> are called to have their own lives determined. Yoder argues that this reading of the Gospels as a unified call to an inherently political discipleship is borne out in the letters of Paul (or "pseudo-Paul" in Colossians and Ephesians), where Christ's death and resurrection are construed as a decisive victory over the "Powers."<sup>2</sup> These Powers are the created structures God establishes to "order" the world, but in their fallenness they seek to absolutize their authority, to become masters of the creatures they ought to serve in obedience to God, the true absolute.

Salvation from such Powers thus demands a way of living in which true order is restored, or through which the audacious lordship of these Powers, if not creation itself, is revealed as "broken."<sup>3</sup> Such is the accomplishment or paradoxical victory of the cross. The ruling authorities sought with their empty charges to provoke Jesus into defending himself, which would have put ownership of his "self" up for grabs; but Jesus lived as if he belonged to none but God, not even to himself. When the authorities tested this "revolutionary subordination" to the point of murder, it was to their own undoing. For with this death it is revealed that the Powers demand not only subordination, which Jesus did not withhold for the sake of any dubious self-defense, but also the possession of their subordinates as slaves, which Jesus' unreserved obedience to the Father precluded.

Founded upon Jesus as exemplar in virtue of his messianic authority, Yoder's politicizing of the New Testament therefore cannot entertain liberalism's revolutionary advocacy of all emancipatory social causes as we moderns might expect or hope. The only thing revolutionary about messianic politics is the truly self-abasing subordination it requires. A more conventionally triumphant revolutionary political agenda cannot but pretend to "get a hold on' the course of history and move it in the right direction,"<sup>4</sup> which hinges on the self-absolutizing power that Jesus refused to use. To follow the Messiah is therefore "hopeless," for to hope in resurrection is to give up the (false) hope of owning and helping yourself.

Thus when Yoder says that "the cross of Christ is the model of Christian social efficacy,"<sup>5</sup> he means both that Christian social efficacy is not efficacious in the usual sense and that Christians must nevertheless comport themselves according to a model of a different, and not only individual, efficacy. This model prescribes a sociality marked by its continual, patient witness to the excessively masterful postures of the Powers, a way of living whose vitality is not self-possessed but always mysterious and spiritual.

In order to make the point that the NT enjoins upon Christians a certain way of being social, a "communing" that submits to political power but does not obey it as power in itself, Yoder believes he must combat an alternative reading of Paul and the Gospels, one that he sometimes calls "existentialist." For him, existential Christianity is a child of Luther's interpretation of Paul<sup>6</sup> which, through its view of justification, divides the Christian subject between soul and body, and divides "existential" from "social" reality. The Lutheran account of justification suggests that one's particularly Christian existence has significance only before God, and that one's righteousness is "radically disconnected from any objective or empirical achievement of goodness"<sup>7</sup> and especially from any "social" behavior.

Yoder believes any such faith that prioritizes the individual's experience of "becoming a self before God"<sup>8</sup> (as Kierkegaard puts it) is apt to ignore the messianic social injunctions of the gospel. He suggests that a broadening of faith to include an empirically or objectively evident sociality is thus intended to undermine the possibility of a Christian political conservatism of the kind expressed in Luther's reading of Romans 13:4 ("Those in power do not bear the sword in vain. For power is the handmaiden of God, his avenger for your good against him that does evil"). Luther writes: "If government and the

Sword serve God, as has been shown . . . then everything that government needs in order to bear the Sword, is equally a service to God.”<sup>9</sup>

For Yoder the problem is Luther’s apparent indifference to the objective character of the government in question and to the meaning of “service.” Such indifference is the opposite of revolutionary subordination, which Yoder would argue is warranted by Paul’s claim that the Powers are mere handmaidens of the true sovereign. What Luther says may be true as a description of what God intends for the Powers, but this is precisely why the Christian faith enjoins believers to be subordinate in a revolutionary way that obeys earthly authorities only in the name of true service to God. This puts the emphasis on the (social) activity of Christian service, not on the authority-in-itself of any government. “Classic Protestantism” cannot make such a revolutionary move, Yoder contends, because its claim that righteousness is accomplished subjectively implies that there is, in addition to faith, no particular way of living or particular sociality that can be said to be salvific. In response to existential disinterest in the “objective achievement” of a particular social comportment such as revolutionary subordination, Yoder’s reading of the NT stresses “Jesus as teacher and example, not only as sacrifice; God as the shaker of the foundations, not only as guarantor of the orders of creation; faith as discipleship, not only as subjectivity.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the influence upon contemporary Christian ethics of this “broadening” of faith, I contend that Yoder’s additions to the existential are not necessary for deriving a revolutionary, messianic social ethic from the NT.

I suggest that *only* an exclusively “existentialist” Christianity can engender a social ethic which never presumes to have a hold on history, because it refuses to turn sociality into an “objective achievement.” I intend to remain faithful to Yoder’s view that “revolutionary subordination” is what marks any genuinely Christian ethic, but I suggest at the same time that only a relentlessly “existential” Christian faith can address the human inclination to self-possession in a way that makes revolutionary obedience possible at every moment. On my reading, existential faith – or, as Yoder puts it, faith “as subjectivity” – does not name a gnostic division of the religious from the social but entails the subject’s active, inward striving for a selfhood that cannot be owned but only *lived* – in relation to itself, others, and God.

To suggest that faith-as-subjectivity needs the addition of an objectively achieved discipleship only courts the sinful desire for self-ownership.

To make my argument, I offer a reading of Book X of Augustine's *City of God*, according to which faith as the existential concern of the human subject engenders not political conservatism but a revolutionary "sociality *ex nihilo*," as I call it. I admit that Augustine seems in his more explicitly political Book XIX to separate the religious from the political in a way that would preclude him from having an adequately messianic ethic. There he claims that the city of God rightly "preserves and follows" all the laws of the earthly city, "provided only that they do not impede the religion by which we are taught that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped,"<sup>11</sup> as if this "religious" concern were relatively indifferent to our "political" lives.

Nonetheless, I hope to show that the more existentially concerned Book X implores us to read Augustine's "indifference" to the political as revolutionary rather than complacent, even while this revolution must remain indifferent to itself as an objective achievement. We will come to see (1) that Augustine's description of faith as the inward turn from demonic to Christian worship simultaneously characterizes a revolutionary shift between a conciliatory and a messianic subordination to the fallen Powers; and (2) that faith as the existential concern of the human subject is indeed indifferent to its objective results but also that faith, in this very indifference, is inextricable from a revolutionary sociality. Only a rigorous existentialism can save Christian politics from a fascination with externalized ends (objective achievements included) that would preclude its participation in a truly "messianic" causality.

### **Worship as Existential Movement in *City Of God* Book X**

Book X is the culmination of the first half of *City of God*, which offers a quite comprehensive critique of pagan political philosophy and theology. In Book X, the critique resolves into one crucial question, that of worship. To show that politics is ultimately about worship, Augustine begins with the universally accepted claim that "all [human beings] wish to be blessed [happy]" (X.1). If everyone wishes for blessedness, and if politics is about securing human ends, then political differences must stem from divergent answers to the question of how we rightly attain this goal and rightly order

our desires. While some (notably Roman) philosophers claim blessedness finds its source in many different gods, the Platonists for Augustine are “the noblest of all the philosophers, because they . . . assert that that which all [human beings] desire—that is, a happy life—cannot be achieved by anyone who does not cling with the purity of a chaste love to that one Supreme Good which is the immutable God” (X.1; cf. VIII.9).

However, the Platonists have nevertheless “supposed, or have allowed others to suppose, that many gods are to be worshipped” (X.1). This is because they somewhat reasonably conclude that since “no god has dealings with [human beings]” (VIII.20),<sup>12</sup> therefore some “good demons” are to be worshiped in return for “purifying” their worshipers for the end of blessedness.

Augustine thus makes it his chief task to “discuss the immortal and blessed beings who have their seats in heaven as Dominations, Principalities and Powers.” His fundamental question is whether such Powers “wish us to offer worship and sacrifice, and to consecrate some part of our possessions or ourselves, to them, or to their God, who is also ours” (X.1). Here we can anticipate resonance with Yoder’s discussion of the Powers, in that both Yoder and Augustine are asking whether to credit created powers with mastery by offering ourselves to them as possessions. However, for Augustine this remains a question of existential comportment – of worship – not of objective achievement. Yet, just because of its indifference to objectivity, his question actually attains to the revolutionary penetration that Yoder only intends. Why is this so?

Augustine’s most obvious complaint against worship that cooperates with demons or lesser gods is that demons are not “pure” enough to serve as intermediaries between humans and a pure God (X.10; cf. VIII.15). Here we must grasp the exact nature of the demons’ impurity, and we can begin, as Augustine does, with the desire for eternal happiness. He claims that only when the desire of a human being (and immortal beings endowed with rational and intellectual souls) for blessedness finds its true end in God, can that being also love his neighbor as himself, for only then is his “self” truly secured. When such a person, “who already knows what it is to love himself is commanded to love his neighbor as himself, what else is being commanded than that he should do all he can to encourage his neighbor to love God?” (X.3). Thus, one loves oneself properly by turning oneself over

in worship to God, the source of all being, and one loves one's neighbor by encouraging this same turn in her.

Augustine can only conclude from this that any created being demanding worship for itself has turned away from God and has consequently become incapable of seeking the other's best interest. Rejecting the subjective activity of worshiping and so belonging to God, the source of all true vitality, such creatures must pursue another way of securing themselves – by being self-possessed. Ultimately this means fortifying their unfounded selves with the misdirected worship of other created beings. This captures the nature of the demons' "impurity": only because demons have turned their backs on the source of all light do they seek to gather to themselves and consume the light of other creatures' worship. Demons relate to all of created reality through demanding worship because they desire to be secure in self-ownership.

Unsurprisingly, Augustine identifies worship per se (*latreia*) with the consecration of "some part of our possessions or ourselves" to the object of our worship (X.1). *Latreia* means offering one's possessions and even one's self, because the desire for happiness seeks to render the self unto the power that can truly sustain and bless it. To offer worship to an object that is not the true source of life, or to refuse to relinquish the self at all, is to throw oneself away. If in theurgic rites demons seem able to give the self back to itself by "blessing" it with ostensibly divine visions, this is only a deceptive tactic for compelling further worship. Of demon worshipers claiming to receive such visions, Augustine writes:

If they do indeed see anything of the kind, this is what the apostle means when he speaks of Satan transforming himself into an angel of light. For these phantasms come from him who, longing to ensnare miserable souls by the deceitful rites of the many false gods, and to turn them away from the true worship of the true God by Whom alone they are purified and healed, transforms himself, as was said of Proteus, into every shape. (X.10)

Thus, created beings who demand worship demonstrate they do not love their fellow creatures but wish only to "ensnare" them, to satisfy their

perverse self-love with the possession of beings as things rather than by resting in the source of all being.

In contrast, Christ is able to plead for us as our singly effective priest (X.3), because with him our worship and ourselves are not referred to anything but the true source of blessedness. Only faith in this Christ, faith in the mystery of his incarnation (X.2s4-5), saves us from the demonic mode of desire, because Jesus does not allow us to worship him as an idol. He would submit to crucifixion before permitting himself to be objectified. Our faith is thus our assent to God's revelation in Jesus of that one *way* of living that leads to blessedness – but also to certain, objective death. Every time we objectify Jesus as a static “achievement” rather than allow him to become our new, spiritual way of living, he dies, and we live only to ourselves. This is the uniqueness of Christ's mediation:

The true Mediator, the man Jesus Christ, became the Mediator between God and man by taking the form of a servant. In the form of God, He receives sacrifice together with the Father, with Whom He is one God. In the form of a servant, however, *He chose to be a sacrifice Himself, rather than to receive it*, so that not even in this case might anyone have reason to think that sacrifice is to be offered to a creature, no matter of what kind. Thus, He is both the priest who offers and the sacrifice which is offered. (X.20; emphasis added)

Jesus exemplifies true worship because in the form of a creature he refuses to accept what is due to God alone; he refuses the demonic mode of securing himself with the worship and the possession of other creatures. To have faith in him is to affirm this refusal, and this faith disabuses us of our inclinations to idolatry and self-possession. To have such faith is to live truly, ever active in dying to self and world, and ever resting in God.

### **Sociality *ex nihilo***

That demons have turned and fallen away from God means their self-love is not satisfied, which in turn renders them incapable of truly loving any other creature. Animated by perverted self-love, they seek to consume the worship of other creatures and thus they inevitably bind their worshipers in a similar predicament. Because the demon worshiper finds herself not blessed

but ensnared, she too cannot love the neighbor. For Augustine, this applies also to those people, especially prevalent in modern western societies, who claim not to worship at all. For everyone has a desire for blessedness, but when this desire does not find its proper end, the person must seek another, false source of vitality. Such a self must puff itself up, to conceal from itself and others the fact of its being torn loose from “any relation to a power that has established it.”<sup>13</sup>

To non-worshiping liberals who claim nonetheless to love their neighbors, Augustine would say they love them only with a flattery that disregards their true good. A “lover” who does not rest in the divine power that establishes both himself and his neighbors can only be a possessor, one who inflates the beloved ones only to affirm power over them. (Keep this in mind as we try to determine whether Augustine advocates a sufficiently “revolutionary” subordination to political powers taking earthly felicity as their supreme end. Does faith’s inward striving to be related in truth to God, itself, and others require the additional social imperative of discipleship? Is faith as exclusively subjectivity already a revolutionary *way* of “being subject”?)

In contrast to the possessive lover, those with faith in Christ affirm God’s revelation of rightly-ordered love in Jesus and Christ’s willingness to give up even his very self instead of becoming a slave to a creaturely master. A Christian who by such faith is “consecrated in the name of God and pledged to God is himself a sacrifice insofar as he dies to the world so that he may live to God” (X.6).

Thus faith’s assent to Jesus means an active dying to oneself and to the world, a repeated willingness to be alive to God. Hereby the believer is freed from the demonic mode of self-love that fills itself with as much created “being” as possible, by a mediator who shows that losing the possession or even the worship of all of created reality is to gain the true source of our living. Jesus “taught us to despise what we fear by undergoing it Himself, so that He might bestow upon us what we long for” (X.29); by dying Jesus freed us from the need to fear fallen creation’s pretension to absolute authority. The believer thus attains freedom from fearing that if she does not hold on to life “in itself,” she will lose herself. Rather, she willingly loses that conception of herself in order to gain her true self, in mysterious expectancy of resurrection and eternal happiness.

This existential description of faith as “exclusively” concerned with subjective becoming is clarified by a brief comparison with Stanislas Breton’s argument in *The Word and the Cross*.<sup>14</sup> Breton claims that the servant form of Jesus, displayed most clearly in his crucifixion, is the manifestation of God’s Word as a word of “dispossession.” For Christians to have their fundamental desire mediated by the crucified one requires they renounce their desires not only for glory or power but for any ontological “somethings”-in-themselves. A person worships God in Jesus Christ only by ceasing to love any “thing” except the power by whom all things were and are made. Whoever so loves God in Christ will not love others by flattery that falsely builds its object up into a self-possessed “thing” but will instead love them, paradoxically, by considering them as nothing in themselves so that they might find their blessedness in the God who created them out of nothing. Such love is a kind of “liberating service, which makes of nothingness not only something but someone.”<sup>15</sup>

Augustine too understands the word of the cross as one of dispossession, in that Jesus’ mediation teaches us to worship God by worshiping no created thing and even by willingly losing our very selves as things.<sup>16</sup> Jesus, though one with God himself, in the form of a servant became a sacrifice instead of receiving one; yet God glorified him, conferring upon him true blessedness. Such blessing is promised also to us if we can only turn to Jesus, by virtue of whose “way” we may truly live, with God as our goal (XI.2).

The Yoderian ethicist might still worry that faith’s exclusive concern with becoming a self before God, even if it extends to a dispossessive love, will nonetheless translate into an ambivalence to, or acquiescence in, even the most debased of political structures – and on ostensibly Christian grounds. So our discussion of subjective faith’s inextricability from true love of neighbor must also show, again paradoxically, that only if Christianity is worthy of the charge of “political indifference” can it approach a “messianic” politics. We must clarify the connection between (1) faith’s willingness to be a subject without attaching itself possessively to false objects of love and (2) a revolutionary indifference to the pretension of worldly politics to put externalized ends, and even history itself, at our disposal.

For Augustine, only a subject who worships the one true God, who lives the existential movement of giving up his very self in order to rest in

God, can love the neighbor in truth (X.3). But more than making faith-as-subjectivity the prerequisite of a sociality marked by neighbor love, this means genuine sociality is identical with the existential movement of right worship. Thus, after suggesting true neighbor love demands the Christian do “all he can to encourage his neighbor to love God,” Augustine concludes “this is the worship of God; *this is true religion*; this is right piety; this is the service which is due to God alone” (X.3; emphasis added). The movement of sacrificing to God the possession of one’s own self is united with sacrificing the “being-in-themselves” of one’s neighbors.

Worship of the one true God thus cannot be separated from living a sociality in which slavery to another creature becomes radically impossible. In faith, one’s subjectivity ceases being defined by *what* one is (for all “whats,” all positions of slavery or mastery, are nothings-in-themselves), but with *how* one lives in *any* “what.” Right worship for Augustine is the institution of a sociality *ex nihilo*, a way of being together that gives no human being authority over the “what” of the community as a *noun* or an achievement, but makes possible a certain *way* of living – communing as a *verb*. True sacrifice “is every work done in order that we may draw near to God in holy fellowship: done, that is, with reference to that supreme good and end in which alone we can be truly blessed” (X.6).

According to this peculiar *way* of being a social body, we love each other in God, which means we consider even the splendor of one another’s created being as nothing in and of itself. This, I suggest, is what Augustine means when he says, “this is the sacrifice of Christians: ‘We, being many, are one body in Christ’” (X.6). The body of Christ is “a universal sacrifice” because it is that one society whose relations are marked by a universal dying to anything that any member could pretend to possess. It is a unique society in not being defined by external characteristics that might serve as objective goals of a very conventional political efficacy. This community is known not as any definable thing but as the movement of dying to the possibility of being something in itself. The church “demonstrates that *she herself is offered* in the offering that she makes to God” (X.6).

### **A Messianic “Making Use”**

Let us briefly consider the concessions Augustine seems to make to worldly politics in Book XIX, concessions Yoder would expect of an exclusively

“existential” Christianity. Granted, Augustine does sometimes seem to be trying to find a way for the two cities, heavenly and earthly, to live peacefully side by side, and more on the terms of the *civitas terrena*, since it at least pretends to know something about achieving earthly peace. However, as Rowan Williams notes, “the last thing [Augustine] is likely to wish to do is to draft a concordat between the city of God and its avowed enemies. His question in Book XIX is, rather, about the optimal form of corporate human life in the light of what is understood to be its last end.”<sup>17</sup>

Just as worship only engenders a true subjective becoming on the basis of its proper mediation in Christ, so a corporate life not directed to its true end in God cannot be a fully “political” life at all. In fact, no political authority whatsoever, no mastery of some human beings over others, ought to be obeyed in and of itself. Servitude is not natural but “ordained as a punishment by that law which enjoins the preservation of the order of nature, and forbids its disruption” (XIX.15).

How, then, *should* Christians comport themselves with respect to this condition of servitude as punishment for sin? Should they obey it by crediting it with its self-proclaimed power to secure happiness as a calculable, temporal good? On the contrary, and in line with Yoder’s reading of Paul, Augustine says Christians in positions of servitude should serve their masters in a way that makes “their own slavery to some extent free,” which must mean transforming or subverting that slavery by “serving not with cunning fear, but in faithful love” (XIX.15). For both Augustine and Yoder, followers of Christ subordinate themselves to earthly powers without fear and without giving credence to those powers’ claims to absolute authority.

Where might Augustine invite the opposite reading, or support the claim that an “existential” Christianity is unfaithful to the “messianic” ethic of the NT because it is more acquiescent than revolutionary? Recall that the politics of the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* are always distinguished, as are the existential lives of the Christian and the demon worshiper, by their ends.<sup>18</sup> One’s political commitments are never separable from the internal ordering of one’s desires (the latter only a modern liberal would conclude). This must give a certain negative significance to Augustine’s statement that “the earthly city, *which does not live by faith*, desires an earthly peace, and it establishes an ordered concord of civic obedience and rule in order to secure

a kind of co-operation of men's wills for the sake of attaining the things which belong to this mortal life" (XIX.17; emphasis added).

The critical difficulty ostensibly arises with Augustine's subsequent claim that the city of God must "make use of this peace also," because this willingness to cooperate seemingly implies that faith itself provides no distinct way of living corporately, and that believers should therefore be happy to participate in a politics that hopes in the effectiveness of human self-help or in the capacity of the Powers to achieve a hold on history. Yoder cannot advocate such a cooperative "making use of this peace," because he interprets the Revelation of John as proclaiming "that the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power determines the meaning of history"; this means that "the key to the obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but their patience."<sup>19</sup> For Yoder, what denotes true Christian living is not only right worship but a sociality refusing to make use of any causality but the one expressed in the mysterious relationship "of cross and resurrection."<sup>20</sup>

However, the argument of this paper leads us to conclude that, no matter how cooperative Augustine may sound on this matter, his "existentialism" means he can only be advocating a *revolutionary* "making use." This is so mainly because he does not make sociality or political life into something additional to, or derivative of, the existential root of Christianity. He refuses to separate true communing from faith as a revolutionary way of "being subject." Thus his description of right worship, as with *any* genuinely existential account of faith, already supplies a messianic critique of any politics not directed to the true peace inherent in a sociality *ex nihilo*, a social body in which every member dies to her effectiveness.

If this is true, then what does it mean for the *civitas Dei* to make use of the peace of the earthly city?

We saw when considering Book X that only those can truly love their neighbors who have died to their desire to possess created being in itself; this means only those have love in them who have been turned in desiring blessedness toward God alone. By extension, for Augustine a society is only truly social by virtue of its participation in a cruciform life, a life giving its self-possession to God, even to the point of death. A life animated by any other end, whether explicitly "demonic" or more benignly directed to the

increased socio-economic welfare of all human beings, is a life that takes shape existentially as possessiveness because it becomes, at best, politics as flattery. If a frustrated desire for blessedness can only result in such a life of possessive, anti-social “love,” this means that a politics directed to any but the true end of self-sacrificing community is a politics of what Yoder calls the Powers.

Therefore, Augustine does not hesitate to say that demon worship takes a tyrannical political form which, when confronted with true worship, must resort to violence. Having excluded themselves from the true way of living by resting in God’s establishing power, fallen Powers necessarily seek to kill any witnesses to living truth because such witnesses also refuse to submit to them and question their dubious self-ownership. But by wielding this weapon of violence, the Powers make such witnesses shine all the brighter, for martyrs cannot be divorced from truth even by death, as Jesus is the first to reveal. The power of such false politics is thus “found to be not merely harmless to the Church, but even useful to her; for it completes the number of the martyrs, whom the City of God esteems all the more highly, as illustrious and honored citizens, because they have striven even to blood against the sin of ungodliness” (X.21).

This is the use the city of God makes of the peace of the *civitas terrena*: a use of earthly goods and subordination to earthly authorities only in the service of Christ, though it will mean death at every moment. The city of God, the only true (non)city, cooperates with the *civitas terrena* through its constant willingness to submit “even to blood” before accepting the false ends of earthly power. Such a revolutionary, subversive “making use” can be engendered only by a relentlessly existential faith, because faith as assent to Jesus’ refusal of objectification can have no characteristics of objective achievement, which would only undermine faith’s spiritual vitality with the temptation to hope again in human effectiveness. This suggests, finally, that Yoder’s articulation of Christianity as an injunction to “revolutionary subordination” is only weakened by his adding the achievement of empirical results to faith-as-subjectivity.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude with a final passage from Augustine's Book XIX:

The Heavenly City knows only one God Who is to be worshipped, and it decrees, with faithful piety, that to Him alone is to be given that service which the Greeks call *latreia*, and which is due only to God. Because of this difference, it has not been possible for the Heavenly City to have laws of religion in common with the earthly city. It has been necessary for her to dissent from the earthly city *in this regard*, and to become a burden to those who think differently. (XIX.17; emphasis added)

To modern Christian ethicists, this statement recalls the contemporary, liberal-democratic, largely amicable separation of church and state, according to which people are believers on the one hand and citizens on the other, an arrangement making revolutionary subordination nonsensical. We must concede to Yoder that classic Protestantism, at least culturally speaking, has had something, and perhaps much, to do with developing this arrangement.

However, this could never have been Augustine's vision, and I wager that a careful reading of the most "existential" of the formative Protestants would offer similar findings. *City of God* is written entirely in the knowledge that true politics cannot be separated from religion, because politics is about living the *telos* of human life and cannot help but be about *latreia*. A "mere" difference in worship between the two cities therefore cannot mean, for Augustine, that political disagreements will be few and far between. It must mean instead that any Christian "making use" of earthly peace – and indeed, any Christian living – comes with a risky confrontation with Powers (even those within our own souls) whose turn away from God makes them unwilling to allow any use not submissive to their total mastery; hence the inexorably revolutionary character of "existential" Christian faith and of properly Augustinian social ethics.

We can conclude, then, that an exclusively "existential" Christian faith is necessary for sustaining a properly "messianic" ethic. As Augustine shows us, only the inward activity of "becoming subject" in faith can support a revolutionary death to all the world's apparently good political ends and ostensibly effective means for achieving them. Thus, only those worshipping

God with the subjective passion of faith can really follow Christ to the cross in their political existence, an existence never achieved empirically but *lived* at every moment. Ultimately, we might venture that only a classic Protestant indifference to achieving objective righteousness can make possible that patient but active living in the causality of cross and resurrection that mark Yoder's "revolutionary subordination."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 [1972]), 145.

<sup>2</sup> See Colossians 2:15, and Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, esp. ch. 8. Here Yoder acknowledges his heavy reliance on Hendrik Berkhof's reading of Paul in Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Yoder, 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), where Kierkegaard suggests that human beings are unique because they have the possibility of the sickness of despair, or the possibility of being a self that wills not to be itself (and so is not becoming a self), and that the blessedness of Christianity is its ability, through faith, to root out despair. Thus, the essentially Christian is to become a self such that "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (14).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority*, in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. and trans. Harro Höpfl (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 21. When Luther addresses his "presumptuous" opponent in these contexts, he is often referring to Yoder's revolutionary Anabaptist ancestors. See for example page 11 of this same text, where Luther says that only the wicked would claim their Christianity exempts them from subordination to the Sword and that "some of them are raving like this already."

<sup>10</sup> Yoder, 226.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), XIX.18. Hereafter I cite Augustine within the body of the essay. See also Luther, page 27, where he indicates that his only problem with secular authority pertains to the Roman, papal presumption to master the beliefs of human beings.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 203a.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. Jacquelyn Porter (New York: Fordham

Univ. Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Breton, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Rowan Williams, "Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the *City of God*," *Milntown Studies* 19/90 (1987): 58.

<sup>18</sup> See Letters 91 and 104 in Augustine, *Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), esp. 3, 17, where Augustine defends the supremely political character of Christianity in virtue of the object of its worship.

<sup>19</sup> Yoder, 232.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 232.

*Justin D. Klassen is a PhD candidate at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.*